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Rossini's Il Turco in Italia, Opernhaus Zürich, 20.02.2022

February 21, 2022 by [rml](#)

Il Turco in Italia is hardly the audience's favorite among Rossini's opere buffe – I myself have seen it only once – but one is always surprised to find names like Maria Callas and Montserrat Caballé in the discography. Even if one must acknowledge that Rossini was more inspired elsewhere, it is still a glittery, exhilarating score that produces the right effect even without starry casts. Of course, this is Rossini, and it is never easy to sing, but the demands in terms of acting here are not negligible and probably even more important in terms of live performance. That would hardly be a problem this evening, for Jan Philipp Gloger's 2019 staging left very little to be desired in this department.

In his interview, the director says he finds Rossini comedies particularly appealing for present audiences, because their hectic rhythm is more similar to our daily lives in the 21st century than how things used to be in the 19th century. At the same time, the sensibilities around the theme of "clash of cultures" have significantly changed since the days in which the libretto was written – and this made it more justifiable to update the action to our days and to show it in a relatable way. As it is, we see a lower middle class apartment building where Fiorilla is a frustrated housewife who reads self-help books and has an affair with the housekeeper (Narciso) until a foreigner (Selim) moves to the apartment next door. There already is some incipient tension among the tenants, for Selim is not the first immigrant of Muslim background in the building. This all makes it sound like all the comedy was left behind. Not at all – the story is told with a congenial look at every character and their motivations, and while we could laugh of the screwball situations they are involved in, we always feel for them and understand their points of view. To make things better, Ben Baur's sets balance the story's needs, beautiful design and intelligent insight. Everyone on stage – even the extras – act brilliantly.

While effective, this is a very curious cast that would have probably felt more at ease in Mozart. This is not a disadvantage per se, but this means that this was hardly bel canto fireworks, but rather refined, musicianly singing. I had seen Olga Peretyatko in her prime as Zerbinetta and Lucia, and had to adjust to her present vocal condition. She took a while to warm, her high register mostly disconnected and forced in her opening aria. Once she reached performance level, one could see that her days of in alts are behind her. These days, her soprano sounds rather like a Susanna voice with some reserves of power when an exposed high note is required. She sings her coloratura legato, but you can't really hear every note as we're used to do with singers specialized in this repertoire. In any case, when the lines are not too high or too florid, she sings with classical poise, round tone and feeling for the line. One tends to forgive her lack of vocal exuberance considering her acting skills.

She has the right temper, looks and timing for the role. Her Zaida, Chelsea Zurflüh has a fruity, spontaneous high mezzo, a perfect Dorabella instrument. I had heard Mingje Lei in video from vocal competitions – and can only believe he was not in perfect health today. He found it hard to project and his high notes grated. That said, his voice is unusually velvety for a Rossini tenor and I couldn't help thinking that parts like Ferrando and Don Ottavio would suit him to a tee. Considering the rarity of good Mozart tenors these days, this is something opera houses should consider. Nahuel di Pierro, the evening's Selim, shares with the tenor the unusual velvety quality of his voice. This is a voice I would expect to find in a Don Giovanni – Rossini's buffo parts requiring a darker and more upfront quality and a tad more flexibility too. However, in this production, the character is shown as debonair and charming rather than formidable and exotic – and Mr. di Pierro's fleece-like tonal quality makes sense for it. The two Italians in the cast couldn't help stealing a bit the show, with voices better focused and more spontaneous than those of their colleagues. Pietro Spagnoli was ideally cast as Proscimo, the poet, both in terms of voice and attitude, and Renato Girolami crowned the performance in ideal buffo singing, with the right balance of funniness and earnest singing. And he is really an amazing comedy actor who had the audience laughing their lungs out with just a tiny gesture.

Conductor Riccardo Minasi never let us forget that Rossini was a composer famous for his writing for the orchestra too – this was no bel canto accompaniment, but vital orchestral sound, transparent, quicksilver. Although he forced his way forward and demanded discipline from his cast, especially in ensembles, he always knew how to rescue his singers in difficult spots.

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Peter

Peretyatko has sung a lot of Rossini and I just don't get it honestly (I don't get her either frankly). I think it's a pretty compromised voice at this point, top heavy without the freedom up top. I don't think she's unmusical exactly, but I don't get much in the way of niceties.

on [February 22, 2022 at 1:10 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

